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AUTHOR Saxl, Ellen R.; Robinson, Jennifer J.
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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of the professional role of teacher specialists in New York City (New York) Teacher Centers was conducted through use of an innovative case study approach. Three research/evaluation questions were considered: (1) what services were being delivered? (2) what impact these services have at individual teacher, school, and district/system-wide levels? and (3) what factors accounted for these impacts and changes? Evaluation proceeded along two general lines. The first was a running documentation system used to track the delivery of teacher center services. The second included two qualitative approaches used by specialists and researchers--vignettes and pre-structured case studies. Pre-structured cases originate with a conceptual framework, specific research questions, and a set of focused instruments. Teacher Centers and teacher specialists in three different schools were the subjects of case studies. Two themes emerged from the completed case studies--the unique role of the teacher specialists and the symbolic nature of the Teacher Center. Pre-structured case studies proved to be efficient in use of time and focus. They may preclude exploring unanticipated opportunities that may arise. The qualitative approaches encouraged collaboration, shared responsibility, and improved opportunities to study complex situations. (MDE)

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USING PRE-STRUCTURED CASES TO EXAMINE NEW PROFESSIONAL ROLES: THE OUTSIDER LOOKS IN

Ellen R. Saxl and Jennifer J. Robinson
Center for Policy Research

Paper read at Symposium on Examining New Professional Roles: Innovative Methods for Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data. American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC, April 1987.

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USING PRE-STRUCTURED CASES TO EXAMINE NEW PROFESSIONAL ROLES: THE OUTSIDER LOOKS IN [1]

Ellen R. Saxl and Jennifer J. Robinson
Center for Policy Research

Introduction

Standing outside, looking in, often connotes the image of the social isolate, the person excluded from the action and excitement of a particular situation. In fact, qualitative researchers and evaluators are often in that position. They try to overcome the marginality of their roles - peering into school life, straining every muscle to hear and observe what goes on - to learn about the dynamics of an educational program and its impact on the people who truly belong in that setting. This paper does not describe the work of the researcher as voyeur. Instead it documents our use of an innovative case study approach to overcome the barrier of being outsiders and to examine new professional roles in a successful staff development program.

Evaluation Objectives

For the last several years, we have conducted research and evaluation studies for the New York City Teacher Centers Consortium (Saxl, 1984; Saxl, Miles & Lieberman, 1985; Miles, Saxl, Lieberman & James, 1986). The project has been evaluated annually since its inception in 1978, and previous studies demonstrated the effectiveness and importance of the Teacher Centers' contributions to education in New York City. In conjunction with the director, we determined that current evaluation studies would best serve the Teacher Centers Consortium as an institution by enabling purposeful

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[1] Paper read at Symposium on Examining New Professional Roles: Innovative Methods for Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data. American Educational Research Association meetings, Washington, D.C. April, 1987.

stocktaking and program planning. The issue was not solely whether the program was having an impact, but the deeper question of what about its work accounted for the impact, and, finally, what this understanding suggested about future directions for the program.

Three major research/evaluation questions were formulated to respond to these goals and to mesh with the Teacher Centers' program objectives:

1. What services are delivered by the New York City Teacher Centers Consortium?
2. What impact do these services have at individual teacher, school, and district/system-wide levels?
3. What factors account for these impacts or changes?

Other purposes also motivated the scope of work and our way of working. An obvious goal was to measure the extent to which the program met its stated objectives in order to satisfy the evaluation requirements of the state and local funding agencies. Additionally, we were interested in documenting the program's structure and its new professional role, that of the teacher specialist, so that other educators could understand and replicate the model (Scriven, 1986).[2]

Last on this list, but nonetheless a high priority, was our desire to work collaboratively with the Teacher Centers staff to design and carry out the evaluation. Knowing that we were outsiders - albeit knowledgeable outsiders - we considered the insider's perspective critical in capturing the richness and complexity of the role and context. We also wanted to provide an educational milieu in which the specialists reflected on their roles and increased their understanding and skills as evaluators.

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[2] In a previous study, we identified 18 key skills required for effective performance in this and similar roles (Miles, Saxl & Lieberman, in press; Saxl, Lieberman & Miles, 1987).

Methods

We believed that achieving our major objectives would require:

o Grounding the evaluation directly in the reality of quantitative and qualitative data collected on the real work of the teacher specialist; and

o Locating the basic data collection at the school level, developing in-depth understanding of how Teacher Center services are delivered over a period of several years, what impact is achieved and why. Statistically summarized, "average" data would not suffice. Rather, we would need concrete particular integrated case histories to understand the real dynamics of service delivery.

Therefore, evaluation work proceeded along two general lines. First, a running documentation system was used by the specialists to track the delivery of Teacher Center services and to assess their immediate impact on teachers, the local school organization and the surrounding educational system.

The second line of work involved qualitative approaches: vignettes and case studies. In a paper prepared for this symposium, Miles (1987) describes the methodology of vignettes and pre-structured cases. As a reminder, vignettes are brief accounts of professional practice, written by the professionals in collaboration with researchers. They are generally rich, meaningful descriptions of successful interventions.

Pre-structured cases, based on the work of Miles and Huberman (1984), originate with a conceptual framework, specific research questions, and a set of focused instruments, usually interview guides. A detailed case outline and display design precede the collection of data which are directly coded without being transcribed. Gaps in data and puzzling findings shape successive rounds of data collection until the analysis is completed and the case is in final form.

The three case studies conducted during 1985-86 incorporated both these innovative qualitative research methods. We used the pre-structured case model to give shape to our work, soliciting feedback from the director and

specialists on the case outline, display formats and proposed interview guides before we began the field research. To work collaboratively, we needed agreement and a common understanding of the research focus and procedures.

Our operating partnership also meant shared responsibility for several components of the final research product, underscoring our effort to work with, not on, the specialists (Block, 1981; Lieberman, 1986). Each of the specialists involved in the case studies agreed to write three vignettes as part of the pre-structured cases. (In the midst of the process, they acknowledged that accomplishing this task increased their workload and stress-level as well as their skills of reflection and analysis.)

We also relied on their documentation forms to inform us about their daily interventions and the level and type of teacher participation - a helpful substitute for being present at the many, varied Teacher Center activities at each site. As we proceeded, we aired any questions related to the vignettes or documentation data in interviews and informal conversations with the specialists.

Working closely and consistently with the three specialists over a period of several months allowed us to build the rapport necessary to make the collaboration fruitful. We learned to react quickly to their signals. During site visits, we sensed when it was important for us to step back to enable a teacher to speak to the specialist in private; or when it was appropriate for us to chat with teachers who were planning lessons or attending workshops.

Each researcher made three visits per site to observe the specialists in action and to conduct interviews with teachers, administrators and district personnel.[3] We also interviewed the Teacher Center director and site

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[3] Actually two of the three cases were carried out by single researchers; the other case was conducted by a two-person team.

specialists on several other occasions. After each site visit we recorded summarized interview and observation data on charts designed specifically for these cases and wrote an accompanying narrative that followed the case outline.

The case outline incorporated the following topics:

* Context and background
* Intentions and hopes for the current year
* Services delivered, their impact, and explanations. This section was organized according to the four major areas of service delivery:
  - Individualized Professional Development (IPD)
  - Technical Assistance/other professional development (TA)
  - Workshops and courses
  - Outreach
* Impact on the school district and the larger system
* Site management
* Integrative Summary

The vignettes focused on three major areas of the specialists' services: Individualized Professional Development, Technical Assistance and Outreach. They enriched the cases by balancing our observations of the specialists' interventions with their own reflections on their daily practice.

As we prepared successive drafts of the cases, we asked the specialists for their reactions - inviting corrections, additions, and interpretations of the data. Although we made no promises to alter our conclusions, we did commit ourselves to reexamining the data if differences occurred in interpretation.

Because our intent is to describe what we learned as well as how we learned about the specialist's role, we proceed to a very brief overview of the Teacher Centers program.

The Teacher Centers Program

The work of the New York City Teacher Centers Consortium falls into four major categories:

Individualized Professional Development (IPD) involves long term,

in-depth, progressive interaction between teacher and specialist, consisting of a variety of interventions such as demonstrating, coaching, observing, and providing constructive feedback. The purpose of IPD is to help teachers develop skills in analyzing and improving their own teaching and to inspire teachers to grow professionally.

Technical Assistance (TA) is characterized by short-term, less intensive work with teachers for specific purposes. A wide range of services includes introducing new materials and resources, giving advice, or helping teachers make use of the equipment and supplies in the Center.

Workshops and Courses are conducted during and after school in order to expose teachers to new instructional concepts and strategies, to demonstrate new teaching methods and to promote open discussion about common problems in teaching. Certain after-school courses are taught under the auspices of area colleges and universities of education which grant graduate credit to teachers.

Outreach is an effort by the specialist to extend Teacher Center services (IPD, Technical Assistance or Workshops), to another school in the district once or twice a week. Outreach also involves specialists in district and system-wide activities such as training new teachers and Mentors.

The thirty-three teacher specialists are assigned to individual schools, but they also have, to varying degrees, responsibilities for providing staff development services to teachers throughout the New York City school system. Twenty-two vignettes, written voluntarily by specialists between 1984-86, capture the diversity and pervasiveness of their work and transform dry phrases like professional development and technical assistance into vivid symbols of dynamic interactions with teachers. (For a full description of the richness of the vignette themes, see Lieberman, 1987.)

Case Study Contexts

To get a meaningful picture of the range of Teacher Center services, we studied three settings that differed in school level and environment, length of time the Center had been operating, and experience of the specialist in the role. Because we believe that the context strongly influences how new programs and roles are played out, we describe briefly the three case study settings then continue with a discussion of two major themes drawn from the cases.

Andrea's Center is at Parkside elementary school which is attended by 1500 students, predominantly Hispanic and black. The school boasts a strong history of involvement in a variety of progressive educational programs and it is considered the "showplace" of the district. Andrea has been the specialist since the Center opened in 1981. The Center is well supported by both the administration and the teachers.

David works in junior high school 311, in a predominantly white community where the relationship between the school and the parents is good. Described as stable and effective, this school has 670 students and a staff of 51 experienced teachers. The Center opened in 1981, at which time, David was a specialist at another Center. In 1984, David became the full-time specialist at 311, bringing with him a wealth of materials and knowledge about teaching. Despite the changes in Center staffing, JHS 311's faculty and administration have consistently supported the existence of the Center in their school.

Brenda's Center at Urban High School is in a much larger setting than the other two sites with over 3500 Hispanic, black and other minority students. The school is in a depressed area of the city that is slowly undergoing renewal. The school suffers from high truancy and drop-out rates yet, under the guidance of a strong administration, has mounted programs to combat these problems. This is the newest of the three Centers we studied, having started

when Brenda, a former teacher at the school, became the Center specialist in early 1985. Teachers are just beginning to perceive the Center as "theirs," yet they gravitate to it readily and speak highly of its effect on them as professionals and on the school as a workplace.

Cross-site Analysis: Two Major Themes

In order to understand the impact of the Teacher Centers program and the factors that account for these impacts across sites, we conducted a cross-site analysis after the three case studies were completed. We examined certain comparable factors across the cases that would clarify how and why this new professional role is successful. We cite here two of the major themes that emerged: the unique nature of the teacher specialist's role and the effect of the Center itself on the school culture.

The unique role of the Teacher Specialist. Specialists serve a vital function as staff developers who not only manage resource centers, but involve themselves in day-to-day school life. Their interventions have a marked cumulative impact on the school culture. Andrea, for example, deals with an experienced faculty at Parkside. There were several new teachers in 1985, but most of the staff have been there more than 20 years. At the start, there were many long-standing cliques who resisted the Center and the specialist. Andrea slowly, but purposefully, has worked toward her goals of unifying the staff and demonstrating the usefulness of Teacher Center services.

She effectively touches base with all constituencies in the school - custodians, secretaries, administrators, grade-level coordinators, parents and, of course, teachers - in an effort to bolster their efforts and to discover ways in which she can help these various groups work together. And she does this in a very personal way. For example, instead of sending notes, she makes the time to meet with the custodians to work out the logistics of

setting up rooms for after-school courses. When administrators ask her advice on how to handle problems, she offers her insight and assistance without overstepping the boundaries of her role. Andrea engages teachers in new classroom management and curricular initiatives by providing them with knowledge, skills, and continued support. Those teachers who are ready to take on leadership roles conduct workshops in the Center, knowing that they can turn to Andrea for guidance and resources.

Her approach is deliberate, not haphazard; she knows when to prod and when to be gentle and reassuring. She has worked assiduously to move isolated groups and the staff at large towards a collaborative effort for the common good of the students. Andrea, in fact, is described as the "glue of the school." Her refreshing attitude, which is genuine and warm, coupled with her high level of competence, make teachers perceive her as someone in whom they can confide, someone who can make a positive difference in their work lives.

Junior high school 311 suffers from fewer overt problems. David, the specialist, is seen as a "resource-bringer" who provides expert assistance to teachers. At the request of the computer lab instructor, David has willingly and continually made his expertise in that area available; together they have succeeded in upgrading the school's computer curriculum. Regardless of the subject-matter or the amount of assistance needed, teachers trust David to work with them in a non-judgmental, supportive way.

On one occasion, David assisted an experienced Art teacher who was reassigned to the Social Studies department. The teacher was having trouble both in teaching the material and in maintaining order in his classes. David not only reviewed the components of a good lesson plan and supplied media resources; he demonstrated new strategies, coached the teacher, observed his work and provided constructive feedback. David gave this teacher at least

some of the knowledge and support that he needed to achieve success in his new assignment.

Teachers describe David as a "concerned, dedicated advisor," a "catalyst" who makes them aware of new materials and strategies, and provides the follow-up assistance they need to try out new ideas.

Unlike Parkside and JHS 311, Urban high school is a difficult and sometimes threatening environment for teachers, administrators and students. The size of the school reinforces the norm of isolation among teachers; the added problems of teacher burn-out and continuous teacher turnover intensify the challenge for Brenda, the specialist there.

According to teachers and administrators, Brenda's role is critical to the survival and retention of the school's continually expanding core of new teachers. Brenda is sensitive to the limited experience of these new faculty members, some of whom have never taught high school before. She briefs them on attendance and grading procedures as well as classroom management and lesson planning. She has succeeded in forming them into small groups so that they provide emotional and pedagogical support for each other. Although Brenda is a relatively new specialist, her knowledge of the social system at Urban and her relationships with experienced members of the staff enable her to weave her way effectively through the bureaucratic structure.

Brenda is described as "sensitive and warm," able to "build the capacity of teachers." At the same time she exudes a no-nonsense air of professional competence and commitment. She is a symbol of both "refuge and success," able to introduce "calm" into the maelstrom of daily school life.

When a teacher who had serious classroom management problems needed to "vent," Brenda listened actively, communicating that she was concerned and ready to help. She offered suggestions, not directives, on how to regain

control. She invited the teacher to return to discuss how well these strategies worked in the classroom. This intervention helped the teacher preserve her self esteem and bolstered her confidence to use these new techniques.

Although Andrea, David and Brenda have very different strengths and styles, there are several common themes that emerge in the case studies illuminating the unique nature of the role. All three specialists are knowledgeable, skilled professionals, able to legitimize their new role with teachers and administrators. They draw on a broad repertoire of instructional and classroom management strategies that are useful across grade levels and in diverse contexts.

They are proactive and independent without threatening the authority of formal and informal leaders. As leaders themselves, they move skillfully through the bureaucratic structure, chipping away at unproductive norms and generating solutions to almost intractable problems. Acting as role models, they encourage others to strive for school renewal and to assume leadership functions in the process.

Described as troubleshooters, buffers and mediators, they are viewed as unifying influences in the school. Over a period of time, regardless of the school level or environment, specialists create new modes of professional cooperation, building mutual support and study groups, linking teachers to resources in the Center and to external networks, and nurturing the school environment as a place of continuous learning.

The extensive work of the teacher specialists and the resultant positive impacts have their benefits and also their drawbacks. The success of the program has continued to generate increased requests for services and, as one would imagine, teacher specialists suffer from the overload of escalating

demands placed upon them as competent, caring professionals. As the role continues to be defined by its demands, its labor-intensive nature is exacerbated. Consequently, the specialists and the TCC organization are forced to make difficult choices as to where and to whom services will be provided.

The symbolic nature of the Teacher Center. The importance of the physical Center at each site emerges clearly in the case studies. The word "Center" is appropriate to describe its purpose as a place from which new ideas, new materials and new school norms emanate. All three Centers are different in size, ambience and location in the school. Though small in size, the Center at Andrea's school bubbles with vitality and enthusiasm. A single table and a couch take up most of the space, curriculum materials are displayed on shelves that line the walls. Teachers describe this place as the "hub" of the school where a variety of activities such as workshops, meetings and materials preparation, go on daily. It is a "warm professional place," "the place to go when you have time."

In contrast, the sounds of classical music lilt lightly from the Urban high school Teacher Center. The quiet atmosphere is a welcome relief from the frenetic pace of this huge building, providing, "a rest from the traumas of teaching." Green plants line the window sills and brighten dim corners of the room offering a respite from stark hallways and classrooms with graffiti on the walls. The Center is sizeable enough to accommodate study carrels, magazine racks, a couch and three sets of tables and chairs. Teachers and administrators call the Center a "haven" of support, counsel, materials, quiet, and even rest. Here, the Center is "psychologically helpful" to the teaching population.

The Center at David's school, a former ceramics room, is the largest of

the three Centers with high ceilings and plenty of space for curriculum displays, duplicating machinery and supplies - even several computers. Though one would suspect that the size of the room might detract from a warm, comfortable feeling, respondents describe it as a "wellness center" and "sanctuary," a site for "informal professional interaction."

Regardless of the location of the Center in each school, teachers travel the necessary distance from their classrooms to seek resources, coffee, support, ideas, camaraderie, and the stimulation of lunchtime workshops.

The existence of the Center itself has symbolic and actual functions. On a very basic level, a coffee pot is the trademark of every Center. Teachers know that they can get refreshments there at any time of the day.

It is the specialist's headquarters in the school. Teachers know they can work with the specialist there or leave notes requesting materials or services. The room is also a resource center - housing a library of curriculum materials and educational journals.

A "home away from home" to many teachers without permanent room assignments, Centers serve as the base for special school programs such as visiting artists, the Mentor program and the All Day Kindergarten Parents' group. Because the space is versatile, Centers are also used for varied after-school courses which draw teachers from other schools.

People constantly use the Centers - browsing through curriculum materials, using the photocopy or rexograph machines, meeting with colleagues, preparing materials for a class or picking up sorely-needed supplies.

More importantly, the Center gradually becomes an interaction site; the place for teachers to provide mutual social support and to engage in meaningful professional dialogue. "This is much more than a room with resources," one teacher stated, "it is much more professional than the

teachers' lounge." The everpresent flow of coffee and conversation and the atmosphere of acceptance create a safe, comfortable environment. But the emphasis is on education and continuous learning for teachers as well as students.

The level of conversation in the Centers is consistently professional. In fact, teachers who are given to complaining or talking negatively about the school usually do their "grousing" somewhere other than the Center because of its positive reputation for promoting school improvement. Teachers who disagree on school issues do so in a constructive way which allows productive problem-solving.

Teacher Centers constitute a new, visible structural change in the school environment. Along with the classrooms, administrative offices, cafeteria and gymnasium, the Center becomes an accepted physical entity in the school. The Centers are respected by principals as an important "place for teachers." One administrator commented that the Center was a "haven" for new teachers, helping them to learn more about teaching and to become integrated into the school culture.

Regardless of its size, decoration or location, the room becomes a symbol of the importance of professional development and of the recognition that teachers possess and are encouraged to share their expertise.

Strengths and Limitations of Our Case Study Methods

Reflecting on our use of an innovative case study approach, several strengths and limitations are apparent. Using the pre-structured case model helped us organize our limited time and data-collection efforts efficiently. We were able to plan our site visits purposefully - knowing where data gaps or inconsistencies existed. The common organization of the three case studies also facilitated a final cross-site analysis that was helpful in generating

policy and program recommendations. It is, however, plausible that pre-structuring the cases made us reluctant to follow serendipitous opportunities that might, in the end, have resulted in richer, more useful conclusions.

The vignettes, written by teacher specialists, introduced the insider's perspective, making the final report more readable (Yin, 1984) and adding the immediacy that even we knowledgeable and empathic outsiders would not have achieved. But dependence on the specialists' vignettes and documentation slowed the completion of the case studies and forced us to prod them occasionally to produce the work.

Working collaboratively stimulated the specialists' understanding and appreciation of the research/evaluation process. Presumably, it also increased their trust in us and their openness about sharing problems as well as successes in the role. And yet - we have to wonder - was the problem of bias or "over-rapport" (Miller, 1969) exacerbated because of our close working relationship with our teacher specialist partners? We did try to counter this possibility by using triangulation methods to ensure verification of data and by reading and reacting to each other's drafts to check objectivity and conclusions.

Combining quantitative and innovative qualitative approaches helped achieve our evaluation objectives. We believe that the Teacher Centers staff, and the wider world of educators interested in and excited about professional development, have access to data that illuminate the richness and complexity inherent in this new structure and role. Nonetheless, looking over our cross-site analysis, which distills the knowledge drawn from the case studies, the findings seem somewhat facile - too neat, too final, not illustrative of the messy interrelationships of schools and innovative programs.

Although we know that our conclusions are based on a continuing history of involvement with the Teacher Centers program and that we are thoughtful, systematic researchers, there remains that lingering doubt - have we studied deeply enough? Have we really captured the essence of this new professional role? Do we know enough to help others replicate the model? Would the impact of the program be the same without the major impetus coming from the teacher organization? Would the specialist be as effective without the Center - and, conversely, is the Center dependent on the presence of a teacher specialist?

Implications

What then are the implications of these methods for our present and future work as researchers/evaluators? First, we are using the methods again this year - with some differences. We are working in pairs, taking responsibility for different sites in each case, but sharing our findings in a more structured, ongoing process. Second, we are working with task groups, (which grew out of our recommendations), rather than individuals, focusing on Teacher Centers programmatic thrusts across sites, as opposed to in-depth studies of single schools.

We continue to work collaboratively - encouraging the specialists to proffer ideas and reactions and to share the responsibility for the final product. But we are requesting one vignette per case, not three. In one instance, an individual will write the vignette; in the other, it will be a group undertaking.

As we move through the research/evaluation process this year, we do so with heightened sensitivity to the subtle nuances of new professional roles - the combination of describable and sometimes elusive qualities that engender acceptance and success. We continue to experiment with the use of innovative qualitative methods, in a collaborative mode, believing that this approach to

research and evaluation improves our chances of truly understanding the complexity of new roles and program structures.

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